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SUBJECT: A TALE OF TWO RIOTS IN WESTERN MALI

¶1. Summary: During the week of July 13, authorities were faced with two outbreaks of violence in western Mali. On July 15, youth groups in Kita looted and burned public buildings when the news spread that tax officers had killed a transporter who refused to stop at a security checkpoint. Several days before this, union workers in the gold mining region of Kenieba attacked a South African operation, demanding employment. Malian authorities dispatched military units to both locations in an attempt to restore order. Though unrelated, both incidents are part of periodic outbreaks of violence in western Mali. Located close to the Guinea border, Kita is a known transit point for smugglers of goods and people. The gold mining zone of Kenieba, a largely isolated region in which there is little alternative economic activity, is the site of frequent employment disputes. These two events underscore the tensions between local authorities and residents faced with severe economic pressures. End summary.

Violence Erupts in Smuggling Zone

¶2. On July 15, a member of the National Guard who was part of a mobile team of Malian tax officers shot at a passenger transport vehicle when the driver failed to stop at a regularly scheduled checkpoint 55 miles from Kita, 100 miles northwest of Bamako. An apprentice driver was wounded and subsequently died. Upon hearing news of the driver's death, youth groups took to the streets, looting and setting fire to public buildings in Kita, including the customs office, the justice department, and police housing. The rioters also set fire to seven official vehicles and a number of motorcycles. One policeman and a National Guardsman were seriously injured. Malian authorities dispatched military police to the area in an attempt to restore order, and by evening, the crowd seemed to have calmed. In a nighttime televised address, Minister of Territorial Administration Kafougouna Kone delivered a brief communique describing the events of the past two days and appealing for continued calm. Other officials, including the prefect of Kita, a National Assembly deputy, and Kita's mayor, repeated this call on local radio stations.

¶3. The riot appeared to be a spontaneous reaction by youth groups upon hearing the news of the driver's death. Kita is located close to the Guinea border and is a known transit point for smugglers of goods and people. Customs and tax officials, who have mobile units that include armed guards, patrol the border in an attempt to curb this trade.

Employment Riots in Gold Mining Region

¶4. The riot in Kita was the second violent demonstration Mali experienced in recent days. On July 10, gold mine workers in Loulo, 220 miles west of Bamako, attacked vehicles and equipment in an employment dispute that continued to escalate as the rioters set fire to a restaurant and housing units on the mining compound. The Loulo gold mining company is owned

by South Africa's Randgold. The rioters, members of the mining union, SOMADEX, demanded that Loulo hire 200 laborers who had been left jobless when a neighboring mine, Morila, shut down in April 2008. The violence spread to the town of Kenieba, site of the Canadian-owned Tabakoto mine located 200 miles west of Bamako. A geologist employed at Tabakoto reported on July 12 that the rioters were threatening the safety of Tabakoto employees, who were provided with evacuation instructions should the violence escalate. Military units were dispatched on July 13 to Loulo and Tabakoto to control the situation and have been ordered to remain at those sites for two weeks.

Comment: It All Boils Down to Economics

15. The riot in Kita is symptomatic of the frustration felt by a large youth population possessing few educational and professional opportunities. Dissatisfied with the poor quality of schooling, recurring teachers' strikes, and little employment options, youth groups are quick to use any confrontation with authorities, whether regional or national, to signal their discontent. Sadly, local and national government response is limited to restoring momentary order and calming passions.

16. Comment continued: The riots in Mali's gold producing region are part of a more targeted strategy to gain employment as well as local development projects from international mining companies. The demonstrations against international mining companies may also be consonant with the

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sentiment shared by many Malians that foreign companies, rather than Malians themselves, benefit most from exploitation of the country's natural resources. End comment.

17. The Embassy's policy is that Chief of Mission personnel must abide by all traffic laws which include stopping at all road checkpoints.
BARLERIN